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# Urbanization as Taxidermy: ‘Man’hattanization of Mannahatta

This article identifies similarities between current urbanization and the practice of taxidermy. Giving examples from the transformation of the natural environment during the history of Manhattan, the article discusses the metamorphosis of natural habitats and ecosystems into anthropocentric artificial objects. Referencing Lefebvre, urbanization is conceptualized as the production of abstract space that ultimately stifles life; by analogy, space taxidermy.

Keywords: Space taxidermy, urbanization, Architecture, Mannahatta, Manhattan

## Introduction: natural habitats as living organisms

In contradistinction to the existent concrete pile built by capitalist ‘man’, Mannahatta [the indigenous (Lenape) name for Manhattan, meaning ‘Land of Many Hills’] before the arrival of Europeans was a land of forests and freshwater ponds and an ideal habitat for beavers (Figure 1).

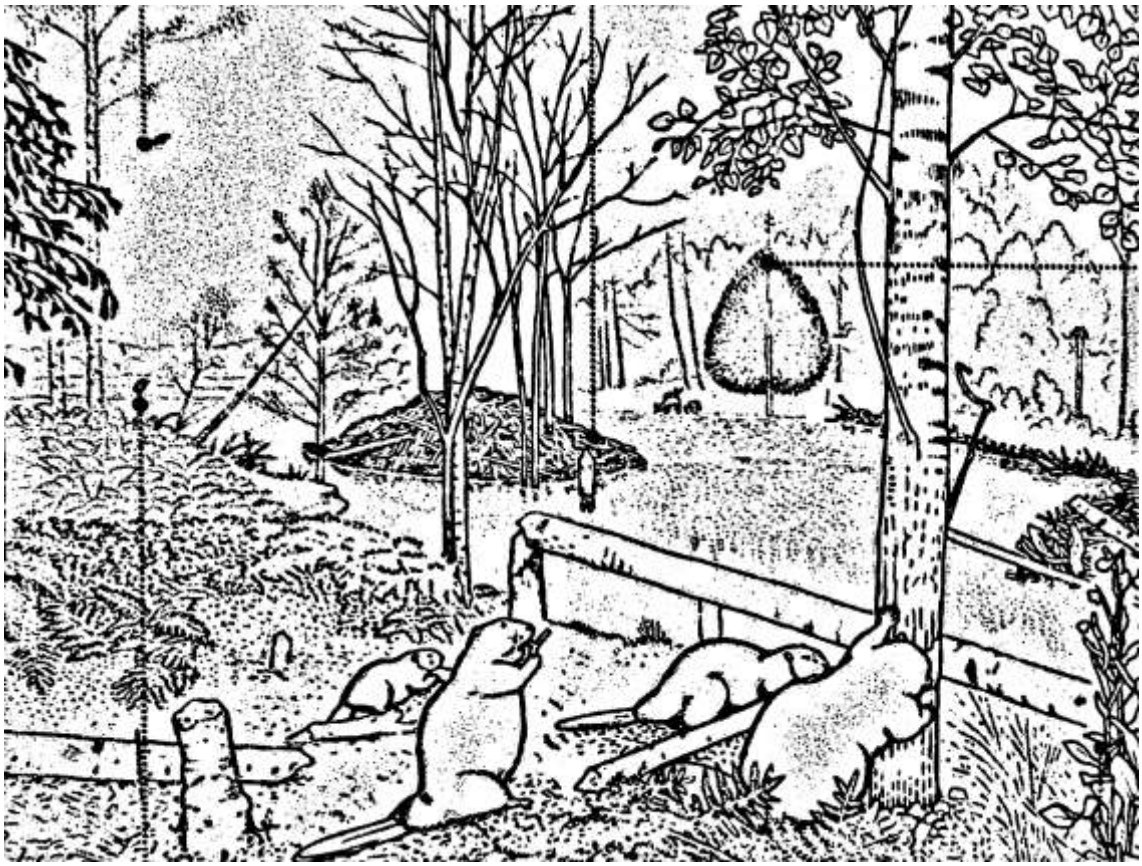

Figure 1: The Drawing of the diorama of taxidermied beavers in the American Natural History Museum.

For thousands of years, the lives of beavers and the overall life of Mannahatta itself were comprehensively interconnected and interdependent. However, soon after the arrival of European men, the 'Man'hattanization of Mannahatta began and the lives and habitats of the beavers were taken. Such was the effect on the beavers that in the last two hundred years the only sign of them has been their image on the official seal of New York City and a few taxidermied specimens in the American Museum of Natural History (O'Connor 2007).

Building numerous dams, beavers were creating habitats and thus participating in ecosystems providing food and habitation for diverse species; algae, a wide range of plant life, zooplankton, insect communities, freshwater fish, birds, reptiles and mammals, and so on. Additionally, and importantly, these beaver dams were slowing down water movement and in the long term were collecting large amounts of rich soil. When beavers moved away to build new habitats, the no-longer maintained beaver dams developed cracks and their ponds thereby slowly lost their waters, drying up and transforming into marshes, then meadows, and eventually turning into forests; the terraforming of Mannahatta (Sanderson 2009, Frisch 1974, Hancocks 1973).

Through the building practices of the beavers, they became part of their environment and their environment became part of them. That is to say, beavers and Mannahatta were a whole, each contributing to the creation and sustenance of the other. Such kinds of cooperatively created and operated habitats containing biotic entities and non-biotic materials and processes act as living ecosystems and even organisms.

**Natural habitat as oeuvre**

Formation of habitats as living organisms requires collective, harmonious, and very

long-term - permanently active - creation processes. Based on these qualities, Lefebvre defines the concept of oeuvre. According to Lefebvre, cooperation, reconciliation and cultural accumulation arising through the spatial enactment of life are inherent in the creation of space as habitat, and as living organism, much as can be observed in nature. For Lefebvre, the term oeuvre refers to this collective creation praxis. The French word oeuvre refers to all 'works' created by an artist during her lifetime. Since space as oeuvre is the consequence of a cooperative communal creation of different generations over a long period of time, space as oeuvre is thus the accumulation of all works done by the inhabitants during the life-span of their habitat (Lefebvre 1968, 1991).

Lefebvre expresses the formation of human habitats as a process of appropriating space through everyday activities and the spontaneous formation of adequate areas for these diverse activities based on the needs of the various generations through the collective life of diverse inhabitants during a long period of time. It can be emphasized that there are similarities between the creation of habitats in the works of nature and the collaborative, multigenerational and cooperative habitat creation by humans (Lefebvre 1991, Sadri and Zeybekoglu Sadri 2018).

The habitat creation culture of the Lenape peoples, the indigenous occupants of Mannahatta when Europeans began to arrive in the area, can be discussed as an example of oeuvre as natural living habitat. The Lenape were mainly hunters and fishers, but they were also cultivators, growing corn, beans, pumpkin and tobacco. They lived three seasons in Mannahatta and during winter they moved to more climatically protected areas, now known as Queens and the Bronx. Because of this relatively mobile life, they owned only what they could carry. Accordingly, they were not accumulating material wealth. What they were accumulating was their knowledge and experience, their

culture, and their culture was their main survival source. Accordingly they were highly conservative regarding inherited practices, mainly because life in the forest could not tolerate any mistake. That is to say, their cultural practices had a long background enriched by the whole range of experiences of different generations. The techniques of building their houses and the way they arranged life inside and outside of them, down to the organization and location of sitting and sleeping places, all followed tribal culture, deeply rooted in the past and in the place, connected to the ancestral learning (Sanderson 2009, Nabokov and Easton 1998)

Most of the daily life activities of Lenape people took place in outdoor spaces. However, when away from their homes they built shelters (Figure 2) for night sleeping and protection from inclement weather (Sanderson 2009, Nabokov and Easton 1998).


Figure 2: An image of a Lenape settlement (Hayward, 1858 - from the Archive of the New York Public Library).

The Lenape built longhouses as their main dwellings, where living was communal. The longhouses were divided by partitions for each family and a long

central corridor connected the partitioned spaces together. These longhouses were symbols of solidarity for the Lenape (Figure 3). Beyond the family, the main unit of social organization was the small clan, where cooperation was essential for survival. Regarding relationships in the wider world, the Lenape had an immensely spiritual world view that shaped their understanding of home incorporated with the land and all its inhabitants and this infused their view of themselves as integral part of nature and the great diversity of species within it (Sanderson 2009, Nabokov and Easton 1998).

Figure 3: Collective life and cooperative building of a Longhouse, the New York State Museum.

The Lenape's inhabitation of the area had strong connections with their past, the biodiversity around them, and the spiritual world they lived in, and it materialized their present communal solidarity. In the light of Lefebvre's conception of the collective creation of space, one might say they were oeuvre. Their habitat was natural and

functioned as a living organism, in which they participated by those means of living in harmony with nature via their communal cooperative works in response to the local unique conditions and following knowledge handed down by the ancestors.

**Abstract space and taxidermied habitat**

As seen in the example of Lenape habitat-inhabitation, space as oeuvre embodies co-existence, association with the past, that is to say the cultural roots, land and the environment, peace and dwelling in its wider understanding. These qualities cannot be found in spaces that are designed and produced in a short time by a limited group according to the desires of the power holders.

Differentiating between 'creation' and 'production', Lefebvre describes the differences between created oeuvre and produced abstract space. In this view, in contrast with oeuvre spaces as 'products' are designed and constructed within the domination of ruling power and as outcomes of collaboration between state, capital and institutional knowledge; particularly so in architecture and planning. Lefebvre calls these spaces abstract, since architecture and planning as oppressive arms of power produce such spaces that in effect abstract everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, Sadri and Zeybekoglu Sadri 2018).

Limiting access to space more broadly, abstract spaces are the 'underpinning' of social hierarchical order. Homogenizing the potential use of spaces by limiting them to particular functions in the bounds of defined architectural forms and accordingly restricting the everyday life of people, abstract spaces are also the 'underpinning' of social norms. Additionally, in fragmenting the collective and cooperative practices of people, abstract spaces are the underpinning of social factionalism as systematic method for control over the lives of people (Lefebvre 1968, Lefebvre 1991, Gottdiener 1993).

Capitalist ‘man’s architecturalized and urbanized Mannahatta thus becomes an abstract space, first as New Amsterdam and then Manhattan, which like a taxidermied creature has a life-like appearance over now-lifeless space. In the history of the island of Manhattan, space abstraction began with the mapping of the wider area by an employee of the Dutch East India Company, Henry Hudson. This was soon followed by fur trading posts and activities up and down the rivers and the subsequent claiming of the island (amongst other territory) for the Netherlands government. It was asserted that the land was acquired by an exchange of trinkets between the representative of Netherlands authority and one of the native chiefs, as per government policy, but since it later became clear that the local tribes had no concept of exclusionary property ownership, in the most optimistic interpretation this can only be described as a misappropriation.

The first significant building project of the new occupiers of Mannahatta was known as Fort Amsterdam (Figure 4). The building was located at a very strategic point with control over the river it fronted, later known as the Hudson River. The designer of the fort was Amsterdam engineer Crijn Fredericxsz. With stone materials, geometric shape, high walls, closed gates and positioned weapons, the fort was built by imported slaves (Homberger 2005, Jackson and Dunbar 2002, Rubenstein 1969, Cantwell and Wall 2001).

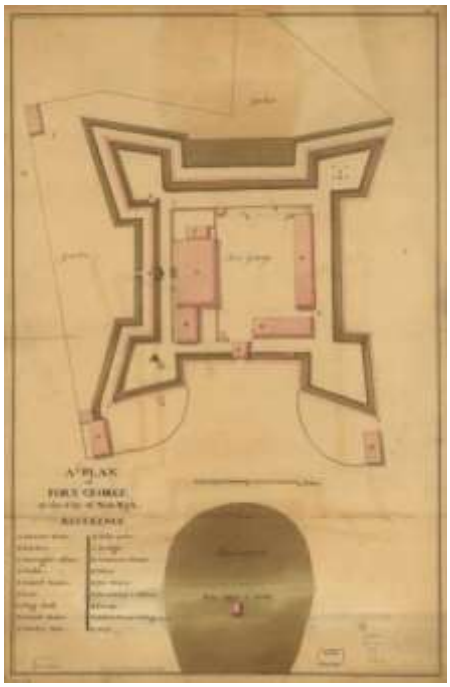

Figure 4: A Plan of Fort Amsterdam, (Sauthier, 1773 - the Library of Congress)

Starting from the mapping and occupation of land by a power claiming exclusionary ownership, through the design of a geometric building without attention to local climatic and ecological conditions and its realization with fortifications and gates using a workforce of imported slaves, in all its production stages Fort Amsterdam clearly represents the new hierarchical society and the spatial mediation of power of the new order (Figure 5). That is to say, as the first major building project of the new occupiers of Mannahatta, Fort Amsterdam exemplifies that a serious process of space abstraction is now under way; in other words, habitat taxidermy has begun.

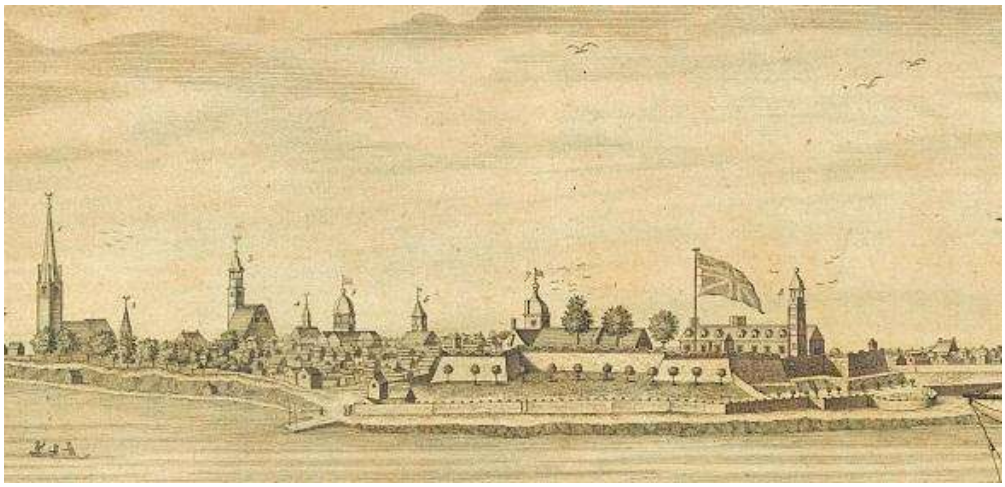

Figure 5: The Fort building and the city in the mid-18th Century - during the British rule in New York, Forst Amsterdam was renamed as Fort George (Carwitham, 1736 - the Library of Congress).

Similar to any other taxidermied object, the natural environment of Mannahatta was purposefully identified and forcefully occupied (hunted), 'cleaned up' (skinned out), constructed (preserved), and settled as artificially reproduced hygienized space of powerful men (Figure 6). The etymology and history of taxidermy supports this analogy with abstract space, architecture and urbanization. Taxidermy derives from the Greek words taxis - arrangement, order - and derma - skin – and it refers to the practice of preserving and stuffing the skin of a dead animal to stabilize its nature and preserve its form in such a way that it conveys momentum of life in a living body. Even though its history is as long as the history of man's domestication (Sadri 2017), as with architecture, taxidermy's current appearance as an art, science and profession can be dated to the Victorian period, the industrial revolution, colonialism, and capitalism in the Nineteenth Century (Poliquin 2012, Haraway 1984-85).

Figure 6: A view of Manhattan and its taxidermied buildings

Taxidermy is the construction of an object/artefact - physically mentally, socially - from a living being. Space abstraction and taxidermy can thus be seen as characteristic of the Anthropocene period, the contemporary epoch considered to have been entered into once human activity began to significantly alter the ground, water and air of this planet, the life-worlds of all life forms on it, its atmosphere and inner space as well. In the same way that architecture and urbanization embody, taxidermy is an attempt by human beings to stop time, to freeze memories, to stand against dissolution and to build immortality (Poliquin 2012). They are likewise hygienizations of nature and as, named by Donna Haraway, they are a "politics of reproduction' and represent the "tale of the commerce of power and knowledge in white and male supremacist monopoly capitalism' (1984-85, p. 21).

Architecture and urbanization have historically mediated power to militate against and manipulate the natural habitats and life amongst them, to produce and reproduce man's world and his anthroparchy - but not all kinds of man, the most powerful ones – as taxidermy does. Consequently, architecture and urbanization become instruments of oppression. They form an order (taxis) under a skin (derma)

which frames the limits of spaces and the activities within, devoting certain space to defined activities and closing them to all other possibilities (Dovey 1999).

**Process of taxidermy and space abstraction**

Space abstraction, as with taxidermy, can be seen as a process characteristic of the Anthropocene. As indicated in drawing the analogy, one can see the philosophy behind these two cultural practices and their processes of production as carrying substantial similarities. In this section, their common production stages are presented as ten phases or steps, beginning with the first intention and finishing with the decomposition of the abstracted space or the taxidermied creature.

(1) Desire: different from basic needs and natural processes, the arising of desire to do taxidermy or space abstraction is the preliminary stage of transforming life-world to anthropocentric artificial object. The emergence of this desire has not been observed in any other living being, or within 300,000 years of human evolution, but seems to be a phenomenon of post-agrarian societies. That is, this desire is a cultural phenomenon, just as moral and ethical frameworks are.
The strong links between desire and morality and the role of morality to balance and control desires are thoroughly canvassed in the book Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness by architectural and cultural critic Elizabeth Farrelly. Naturally, and in evolutionary terms, people should want mostly what is "good" for them. But if humans do mostly desire what they think is good for them, then this desire contains a profound paradox, which is indicated in the destructive effects of human activities, particularly in the recent century or two, with the distorted human-nature relations and demoralization in society. By demoralization we mean the deviation of current moral judgements away from

ethical values such as solidarity, justice, and taking good care of the Earth which is our common home. Accordingly, by analogy, anthropocentric colonial desires of taxidermying and space abstraction arise from man's loss of ethical values, his insensitivity towards the value of life itself, and his disengagement from his natural origin and life-world (Farrelly 2008, Haraway 1984-85, Poliquin 2012).

(2) Planning: Planning is the next step in the process of realization of the desire. In taxidermy planning includes the selection of: the animal, the conditions and location of exhibition, the process and methods to be used, budget and financing, contributors and partners in the exercise, requisite visits and travels, materials and technologies. Similarly in the building processes that result in abstract space production, this stage includes all the pre-production activities from selection of the site to legal procedures, from planning the modes and methods of the production process to financial issues, from construction technologies and materials to organization of labor.

(3) Hunting: The third phase of taxidermy is acquiring the chosen animal, hunting. That is, removing it from its habitat and ending its life. Hunting is the stage of the realization of anthroparchy and it turns the victim and all its natural relations into human-controlled phenomena. This is the stage of colonization of the existence, body and life of the animal, disconnecting it from its past and forcing its future; clearing the living real-time moment out of its life world. In space abstraction this stage is site occupation. This occupation includes mental, physical and social modes such as defining the parameters of property ownership (mental), reshaping the topography and clearing the land of existing living beings (physical), and segregating the land from its wider environment and limiting access to it (social).

(4) Skinning: Skinning is the next step in taxidermy, where the body is removed from the skin, the insides are emptied out. In space abstraction, this is the stage of defining the outer skin of the building; in other words, mass and conceptual design. This skin shapes the dichotomy of 'indoor' and 'outdoor' and tries to limit and control all exchanges between them. The more determined and defined skins result in more abstracted space and life within that. Impermeability; solidity; independence of the conditions of the site and the life within it; and ignorance of the scale of life itself, all make the life-world more abstracted through the stage of skinning or conceptual design.

(5) Tanning: The fifth step in taxidermy is tanning, or simple boraxination of the skin, thereby preserving it and ensuring the remaining natural part of the animal's body becomes stable - protected from decomposition. The parallel in space production is concentrating on 'functions', or in other words the defined activities of limited inhabitants during limited periods of usage of the abstracted spaces that are built with artificial materials and stabilized by durable structures. These qualities of abstracted spaces together generate resistance to change, including social or natural ones.

(6) Stuffing: The sixth step in taxidermy is the process of stuffing the preserved skin of the creature with artificial materials. In space abstraction, stuffing is the stage of determining the interior organization and decoration of spaces, namely defining a specific standard for inhabitants that will have the effect of controlling daily life during their residency. This is a highly ideological stage in space abstraction and it is the opposite of natural inhabitation and place-making activities carried out as they arise in response to the life needs and preferences.

(7) Mounting: Taxidermy's seventh stage is mounting: stitching the skin, organizing the physical support of the thing, installing artificial pieces to represent eyes, horns, beaks, and so on. These are the final touches before presentation and display. In space abstraction, this phase includes installing machines, mechanisms, doors, cabinets, keys, and similar items, in the bounded space. Even though it may appear that minor works are done at this stage of building, the mounting phase strongly defines life conditions and quality in the resulting abstract spaces. Climate control systems, fire alarms, curtains, lighting, electronic and digital appliances; their style and quality, the height and position of control keys, their opening and closing systems, all significantly affect everyday life of the residents. Mounted devices in abstract spaces support the abstraction of the life-world and the emergence of 'users' or 'consumers' instead of living beings.

(8) Settling: Settling is the eighth step of taxidermy, where the animal is placed in a diorama, a fabricated scene into which the taxidermied creature is carefully placed. Although the match between stuffed creature and the diorama is consistent in its simulation of 'life' and 'habitat', the thing remains alien and the effect is uncanny, disturbing. In space-abstraction terms, one sees the analogy in the accommodation of families in contemporary mass-produced (abstract) houses, the decoration of their walls with photos or other objects to memorize or memorialize the past, placement pot plants to resemble nature, and sometimes burning incense sticks to purify the space; life-like scenes are created. Likewise, in funeral practices, dead bodies are made up and dressed as if living. Producing unnatural, unreal and fake qualities, taxidermy becomes a storyteller or identity builder at this stage (Figure 7) (Pray 1913, Poliquin 2012).

Figure 7: Endless view of a volcano and lake in a sunset moment painted in the background and dominant figure of a male gorilla in between the other gorillas and green ground in a diorama of Gorillas in the corner of the Akeley Hall of African Mamals in the American Natural History Museum.

(9) Maintenance: Similar to all non-biotic items, taxidermied bodies need constant maintenance. Life continues around them and it affects them, but their dead or otherwise inanimate bodies cannot adapt to the conditions or develop relationships with or within the environment to protect themselves. They do not have any mechanism of self-maintenance. Artificially produced abstracted spaces likewise are not resilient to any change in their state arising from life/environmental conditions. Accordingly, they must receive non-stop maintenance. Cost, complexity and frequency of needed maintenance usually affect the success or failure of these projects over time.

(10) Decomposition: the final stage of taxidermy is decomposition. In principle taxidermy aims to prevent this occurring, yet decomposition of taxidermied creatures happens when for different reasons and mostly because of efficiency and resource problems maintenance of them stops. The decomposition of the dead body with its various chemical toxins then begins; not having any strategy for clean decomposition will result in highly risky environmental pollution. The analogous process in space abstraction occurs when the built space is abandoned or demolished, intentionally or through natural disaster, and in any of these cases the building waste needs careful management.

**Space taxidermy decagon and the diminishing spiral**

In the above definition of the stages of taxidermy the tenth phase, decomposition, turns production from a line into a cycle by leading the final product to the zero point. As a result, in the theoretical medium the process appears as a decagon where the start and finish points meet, and its phases follow one another without any gap, where each of them builds the necessary ground for the following one. However, in reality due to the lots of ethical, social and ecological losses, the system does not function fully and the circle is not completed. Specifically because the final step is rarely projected, the circle remains unclosed. Additionally, during these steps, the work does not always progress as planned. As a result of the malfunctioning of stages and uncompleted cycles, the decagon turns into a diminishing spiral formed by crooked steps (Figure 8). This spiral has a lot of leakages and constantly consumes more than it produces. These leakages generate sub-products such as harm, distress, tyranny, disorder, pollution, and demoralization, including in particular situations where successful completion of the tenth step is not forthcoming. The constant operation of this leaky spiral causes shortage of materials and energies, in other words, famine.

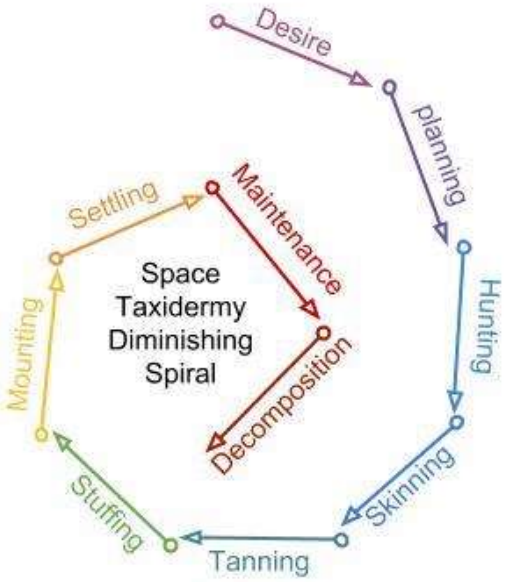


Figure 8: The Real Space Taxidermy Diminishing Spiral.

In the space abstraction process, or space taxidermy, the sub-products of the malfunctioning of the decagon and its turn to a diminishing spiral are ethical, social and ecological problems such as injustice, pollution, climate change, centralization of power, life vulnerability, poverty, deforestation, and soil erosion. All these sub-products are clearly visible in the transformation of Mannahatta into Manhattan during the last four centuries (Figure 10).

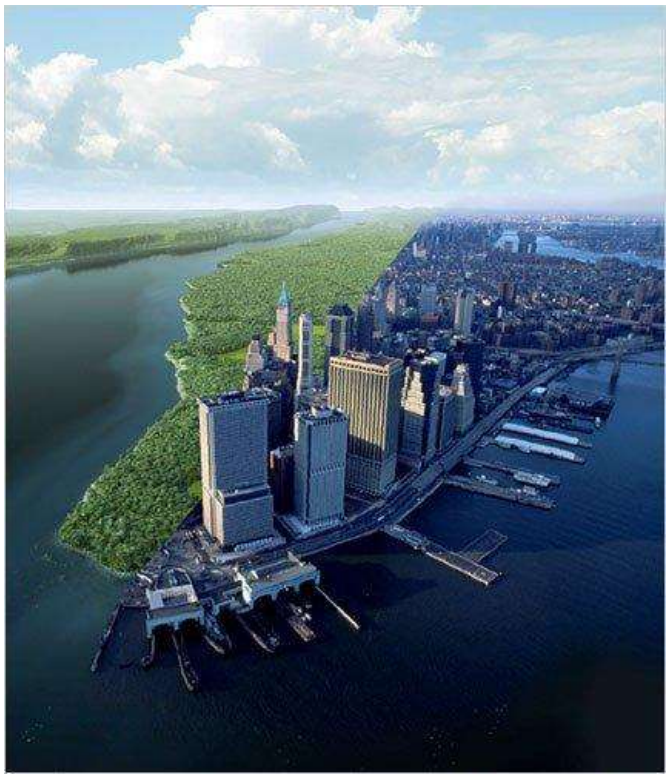

Figure 10: The bio-divers and productive ecological landscape of Mannahatta four hundred years ago and today's Manhattan (Sanderson, 2009, p: 208).

**CONCLUSION**

Four hundred years after its occupation by the new power, the generative landscape of Mannahatta does not exist anymore. The island hardly ever generates all the needs of its inhabitants, such as food, water, energy, air, and even shelter. Many of these goods are produced and imported from far away. For production of the everyday food needs of its current population, an area of approximately 60,000 square kilometers is used from farmlands all around the world. This is 1,000 times larger than the surface area of Manhattan. The same goes for supplying its water from huge amounts of land in upstate areas, nineteen reservoirs and three lakes (Sanderson 2009). Manhattan eats and consumes one thousand Manhattans and in return it gives thousands of tons of daily produced garbage to vast areas outside of itself. For its energy usage vast quantities of the resources of the planet are consumed; what is given back on this is pollution. As a

social sub-product, in addition to homelessness, hunger and disorder the system engenders kinds of systematic exploitation both inside and outside of the city borders. This system is not resilient. It is fragile and it will fracture eventually (Sadri, 2018).

Contemporary space abstraction processes and the spatial design serving these, as illustrated in the diminishing spiral, above, are taking resources from the habitats and turning them into dead-lands. Thus, owing to our consumer life we are constantly losing our planet. For this reason, ethical actions must concentrate on the regeneration of the loss and not on the sustainability of existing conditions. Sustainable steps are not enough for the circumstances, and not progressive. These steps try to keep the taxidermied body appears as a living one. The steps to be taken need to be actively regenerative, aiming to rehabilitate the degenerate ethical and socio-ecological systems. More than sustaining the existing practices and beautifying them with ecological terms, we need long term de-urbanization and de-architecturalization visions with strong emphasises on regeneration of ecosystems, re-moralisation of social life, local and self-sufficient, ecocentric and self-organizing living habitats (Zeybekoglu Sadri, and Sadri, 2019). Experiencing COVID-19 outbreak taught us that this change is necessary and needs to be started immediately.

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